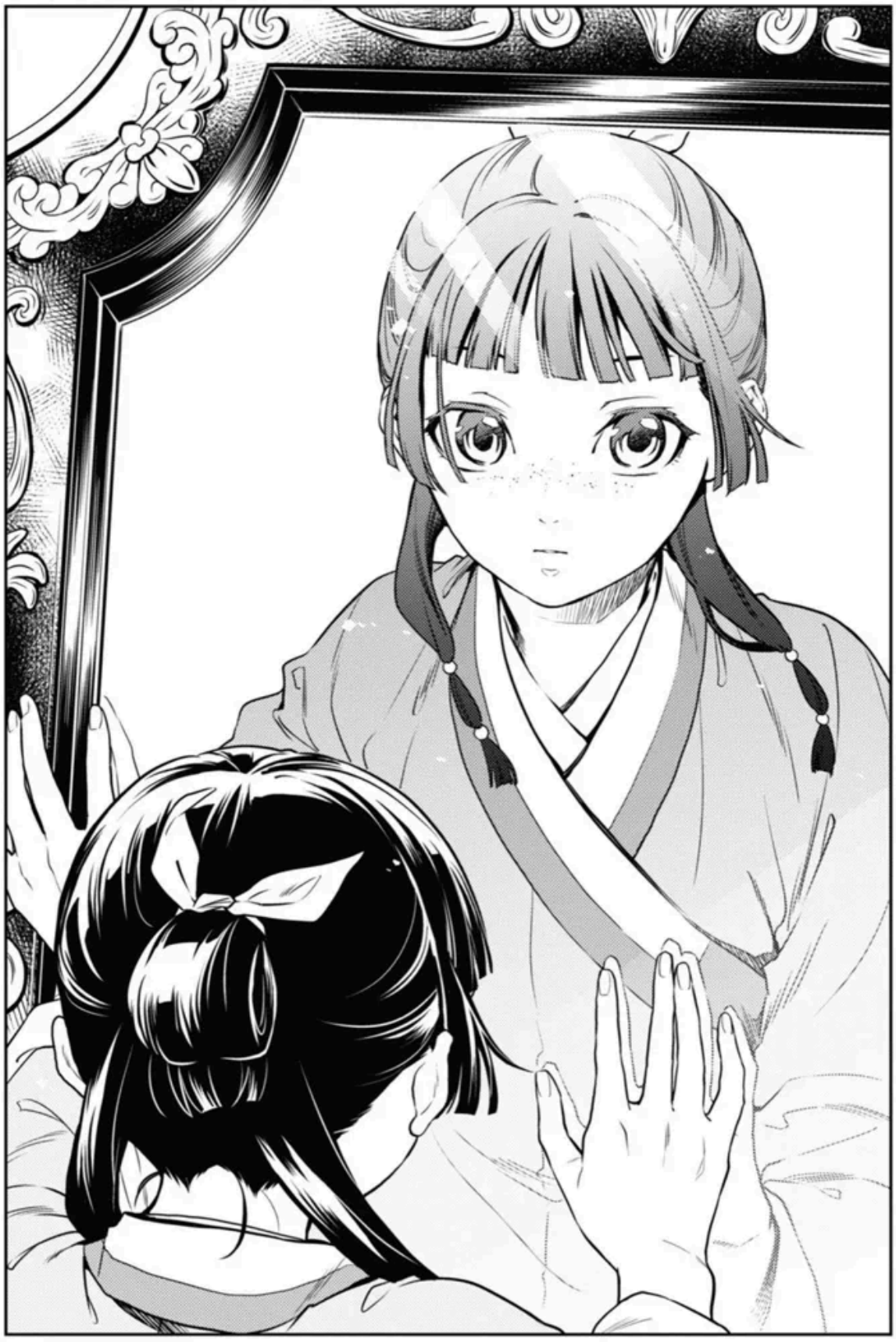
Chapter 46 Mirrors



HEY, MAOMAO! LOOK!
OOOH!
THAT'S INCRED-IBLE.
ISN'T IT JUST?!
CAN YOU TELL...
...WHAT THIS LOOKING GLASS IS MADE OF?
AHA.
THIS MUST BE WHY THEY WENT TO THE TROUBLE OF SENDING FOR ME.

GLASS, I PRESUME?
BOO.
OF COURSE YOU'D KNOW.
A TYPICAL MIRROR ...
...IS MADE OF BRONZE PLATE, THE SURFACE OF WHICH HAS BEEN POLISHED TO A BRIGHT SHEEN.
COLORS, HOWEVER, APPEAR MUDDLED IN BRONZE MIRRORS.
BUT THIS FULL-LENGTH MIRROR MADE OF THIN GLASS...
...CAN BEAU-TIFULLY REFLECT THOSE SAME COLORS WITH VIVID ACCURACY.
IT'S ALMOST AS IF THERE ARE TWO CONSORT GYOKUYOS STANDING BEFORE ME.
GLASS MIRRORS MUST BE DIFFICULT TO MAKE.
THEY CAN ONLY BE IMPORTED FROM THE WEST, SO NOT ONLY ARE THEY RARE...
...THEY'RE ALSO A LUXURY TO POSSESS.

UGH, I ASKED YOU TO STOP BRINGING THAT UP!
...BUT YINGHUA WENT AND BROKE IT.
WE HAD A GLASS HAND MIRROR A WHILE AGO...

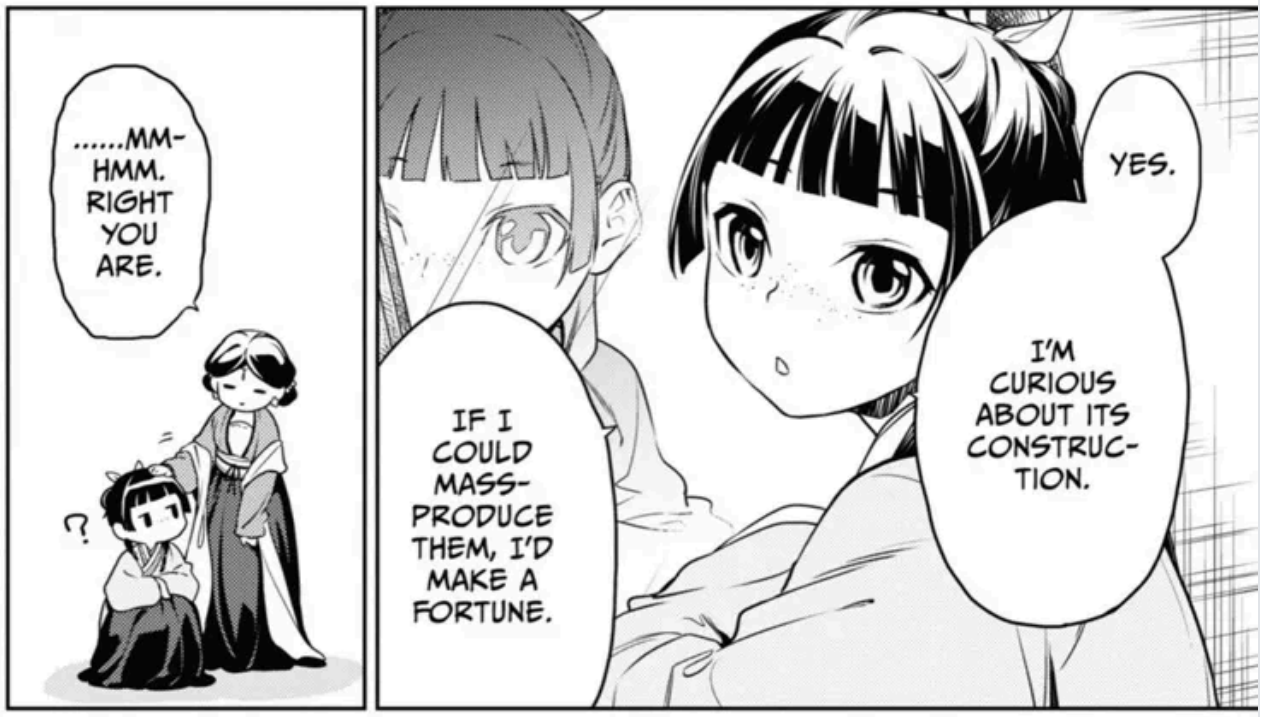
LUCKY FOR HER, CONSORT GYOKUYO HAS A KIND HEART.
SHE COULD'VE LOST HER HEAD FOR BREAKING SUCH AN EXTRAVA-GANCE.

YOU KNOW, JUST THE OTHER DAY, THE QUACK...
...SAID SOMETHING ABOUT THE BIG MERCHANT CARAVAN BEING INTENDED TO PAVE THE WAY FOR SOME FOREIGN ELITE.
KIND OF LIKE AN ADVANCE PARTY...

YOU SEE, THIS IS A PRESENT FROM A FOREIGN ENVOY.
AN ENVOY, YOU SAY?

HEY, WATCH YOUR TONGUE.
OUR LADY'S NOT SPECIAL, THOUGH. THEY GAVE THESE TO THE OTHER PRINCIPAL CONSORTS TOO.

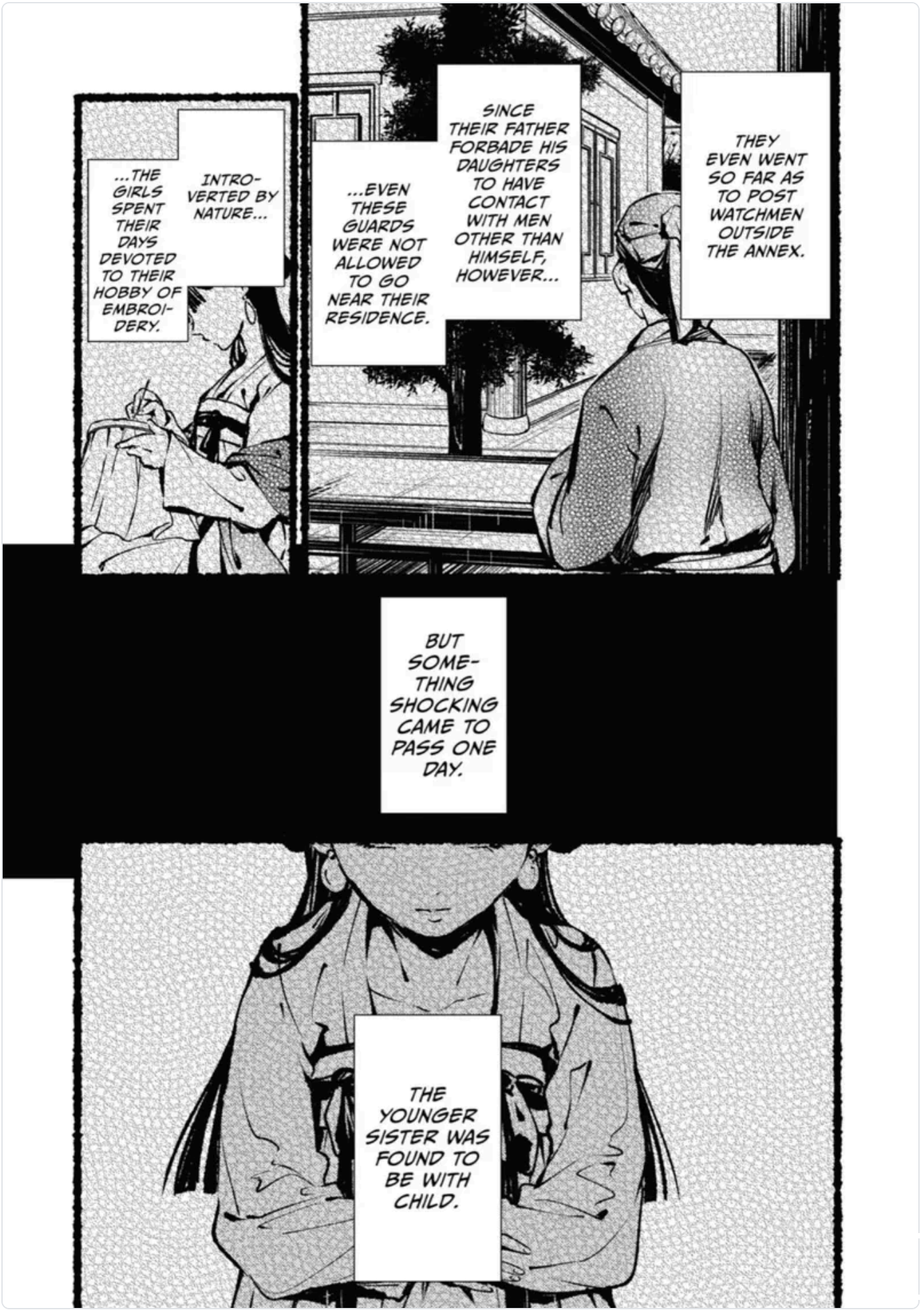
IT MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE THE FEAT TO GET FOUR OF THESE BEAUTIFUL MIRRORS HERE IN ONE PIECE.
EVEN A FOREIGN EMISSARY CANNOT BE SEEN TO FAVOR JUST ONE OF THEM.
THERE ARE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS WHO HOLD THE HIGHEST POSITIONS AT COURT, CONSORT GYOKUYO INCLUDED.
OH!
WELL, WELL! CAUGHT YOUR INTEREST TOO, HAS IT, MAOMAO?
THE ENVOY MUST BE AFTER SOMETHING BIG, A TRADE DEAL OR WHATNOT.
BUT TAKING SO MUCH CARE TO EXTEND SUCH GIFTS TO THE TOP CONSORTS AS WELL...
GIVING A GIFT LIKE THIS TO THE EMPEROR IS ONE THING.


.....MM-HMM. RIGHT YOU ARE.
?
IF I COULD MASS-PRODUCE THEM, I'D MAKE A FORTUNE.
I'M CURIOUS ABOUT ITS CONSTRUC-TION.
YES.

THE NEXT DAY...
...GAO SHUN ARRIVED WITH A MATTER TO DISCUSS.
HONG-NIANG WAS ALSO PRES-ENT...
...OUT OF CONSIDER-ATION. SHE WOULD NOT LEAVE ANY MAN, EUNUCH THOUGH HE MAY BE, ALONE WITH A COURT LADY.

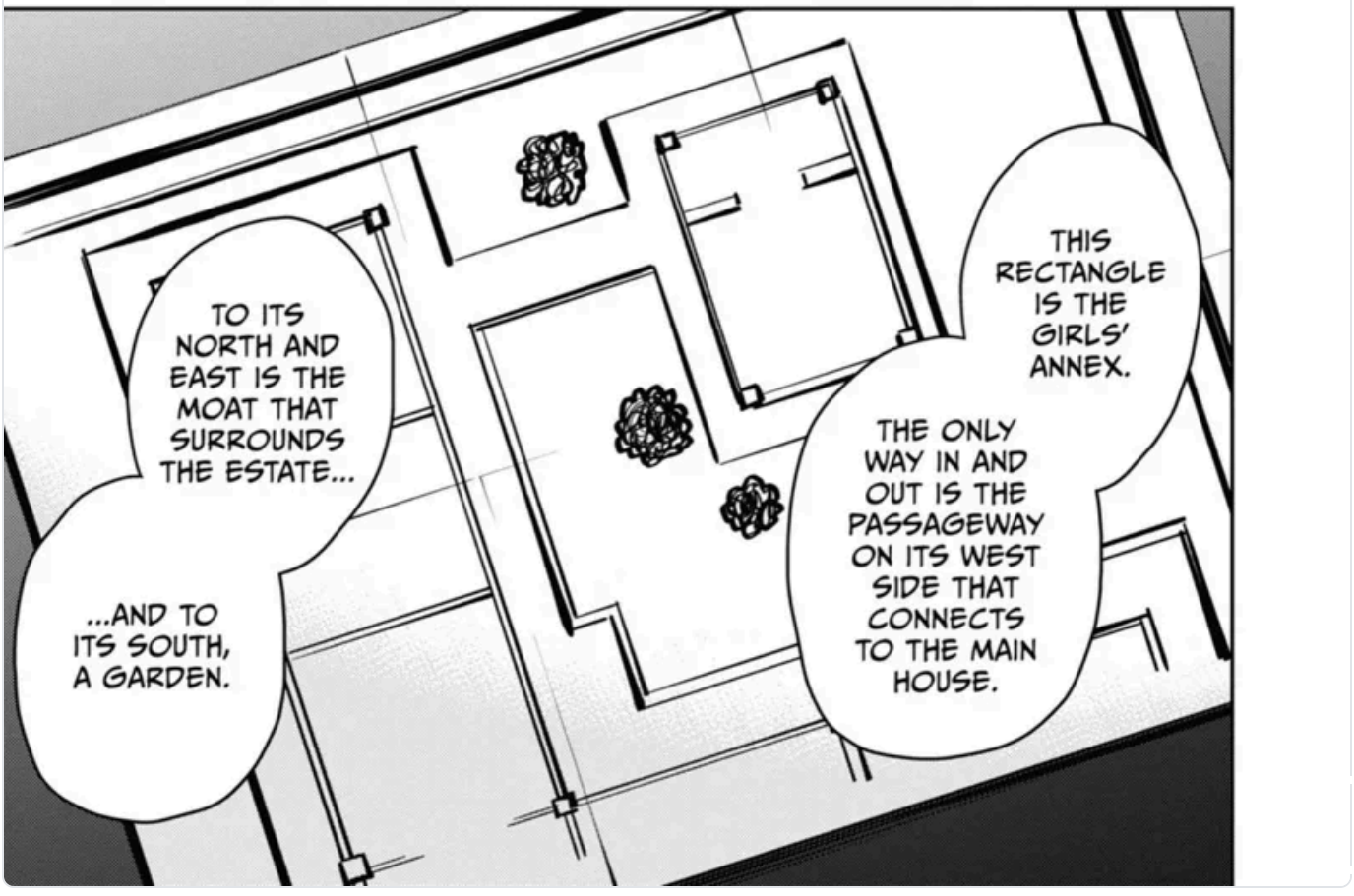
I WISH TO HEAR YOUR OPINION ON SOMETHING, XIAOMAO.
SULK
Hn..
HONGNIANG HAD HER EYE ON GAO SHUN FOR A WHILE...
...BUT IT SEEMS THAT SHE RECENTLY LEARNED HE WAS MARRIED WITH CHILDREN.
THAT'S WHY SHE'S LOST ALL INTEREST IN HIM.
SO WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?
VERY WELL.
OF COURSE. ALTHOUGH I CAN'T PROMISE TO BE OF MUCH HELP...

THERE WAS A CERTAIN WELL-TO-DO FAMILY WITH TWO SIMILARLY AGED DAUGHTERS.
DURING THE DAY, THEY HAD FEMALE ATTENDANTS WATCHING OVER THEM.
AT NIGHT, THEIR FATHER WOULD LOCK THEM IN.
ONCE THE GIRLS CAME OF AGE, THEIR OVERPROTECTIVE PARENTS...
...ISOLATED THEM IN AN ANNEX OF THE FAMILY HOME AND FORBADE THEM FROM VENTURING OUT ALONE.
...AND THE NEW ATTENDANTS WERE ALLOWED ONLY MINIMAL CONTACT WITH THE GIRLS.
WHEN THE GIRLS' PARENTS DISCOVERED THIS, THE ATTENDANTS WERE DISMISSED...
...FOR THEY WOULD BRING THEM OUTSIDE WHENEVER THEY SPIED A CHANCE.
PERHAPS THE WOMEN TOOK PITY ON THE POOR THINGS...


...THE GIRLS SPENT THEIR DAYS DEVOTED TO THEIR HOBBY OF EMBROIDERY.
INTROVERTED BY NATURE...
...EVEN THESE GUARDS WERE NOT ALLOWED TO GO NEAR THEIR RESIDENCE.
SINCE THEIR FATHER FORBADE HIS DAUGHTERS TO HAVE CONTACT WITH MEN OTHER THAN HIMSELF, HOWEVER...
THEY EVEN WENT SO FAR AS TO POST WATCHMEN OUTSIDE THE ANNEX.
BUT SOMETHING SHOCKING CAME TO PASS ONE DAY.
THE YOUNGER SISTER WAS FOUND TO BE WITH CHILD.

BUT THEY HAD BEEN VIGILANT IN KEEPING AN EYE ON THE GIRLS.
THE ONLY WAY TO SNEAK INTO THE ANNEX WOULD HAVE INDEED BEEN TO EMPLOY THE POWERS OF AN IMMORTAL.
THEIR PARENTS FLEW INTO A RAGE AT THE ABSURD STORY.
...SHE CLAIMED.
"SHE CARRIES THE CHILD OF AN IMMORTAL"...
THE ELDER SISTER COVERED FOR THE YOUNGER.
AND SO, THEIR PARENTS ARE AT QUITE A LOSS.
ARE THEY POSITIVE THE GIRL IS WITH CHILD?
I'VE HEARD THAT THE DESIRE FOR A CHILD CAN DELUDE A WOMAN'S BODY INTO THINKING SHE'S PREGNANT.
AS FOR THE MATTER OF WOMEN CONCEIVING WITHOUT THE HELP OF A MAN...
HOW OUTRAGEOUS!
IT IS CERTAINLY A CURIOUS TALE, BUT I DON'T THINK IT'S REALLY MY AREA OF EXPERTISE.
118

SHP
HE'S EVEN GONE TO THE BOTHER OF PREPARING A FLOOR PLAN?
HOW EXACTLY ...
...WERE THE GIRLS BEING WATCHED?
RUSTLE
HE'S BEING EVASIVE.
...AT LEAST, I SUPPOSE AS MUCH.
YES.


TO ITS NORTH AND EAST IS THE MOAT THAT SURROUNDS THE ESTATE...
...AND TO ITS SOUTH, A GARDEN.
THIS RECTANGLE IS THE GIRLS' ANNEX.
THE ONLY WAY IN AND OUT IS THE PASSAGEWAY ON ITS WEST SIDE THAT CONNECTS TO THE MAIN HOUSE.

EUGH!
SO THEY BUILT A PRIVY INSIDE THE RESIDENCE EVEN THOUGH SUCH AN AMENITY IS MEANT TO BE OUTSIDE?
THEY WEREN'T KIDDING ABOUT WANTING TO KEEP THESE GIRLS TRAPPED.
WHERE DO THEY GO TO RELIEVE THEM-SELVES?
WITHIN THE ANNEX.
SWISH
SWISH
THERE ARE TWO. ONE ON THE EASTERN SIDE AND ONE ON THE SOUTHERN SIDE.
THERE MUST BE WINDOWS FOR THE GUARDS TO WATCH THE GIRLS THROUGH. WHERE ARE THEY?
IN OTHER WORDS ...
THEY MUST ALSO BE SOMEWHERE HIGH UP ENOUGH TO SEE IN THROUGH THE ANNEX WINDOWS.
THE GUARDS OUTSIDE THE ANNEX MUST KEEP WATCH FROM A DISTANCE ACROSS THE COURT-YARD.

WERE THE GUARDS POSTED INSIDE THE MAIN HOUSE?
THAT'S RIGHT.
ONE POST WAS ON THE FIRST FLOOR TO THE EAST SIDE...
...AND THE OTHER ON THE THIRD FLOOR TO THE SOUTH SIDE.
WHAT CAN BE SEEN FROM THIS WINDOW MUST BE QUITE LIMITED.
JUST SO.
AND YET THE DAUGHTERS WERE SAID TO SIT BY IT DAILY WITH THEIR NEEDLE-WORK.
THE WALL CREATES TOO MANY BLIND SPOTS FOR THE POSITION TO THE EAST. THEY MUST ONLY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SEE IN FROM THE FIRST-FLOOR POST.
121

IT WOULD HAVE MADE KEEPING AN EYE ON THE TWO EASIER AS WELL.
...WOULD DEFINITELY BE BETTER THAN USING A LAMP WHILE THE SUN IS OUT.
TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE LIGHT FROM THE WINDOW DURING THE DAY...
I'M TOLD THE FAMILY IS DESCENDED FROM A TRIBE OF NOMADS.
IN-DEED.
EMBROI-DERY IS A RATHER CURIOUS HOBBY TO HAVE.
TAKING THAT INTO CONSID-ERATION, IT'S NOT ALL THAT UNUSUAL A PASTIME FOR THE GIRLS TO HAVE.
...BUT EMBROIDERY HOLDS SIGNIFICANCE FOR MANY AMONG THE MINORITY PEOPLES.
HONGNIANG HAILS FROM AN UPPER-CLASS FAMILY, SO IT MIGHT SEEM ODD TO HER...

BASED ON THIS LAYOUT, THE TWO WINDOWS ARE IN THE SAME ROOM.
THE BED-CHAMBER MUST BE ELSE-WHERE.
WAS THE ANNEX ORIGINALLY BUILT TO HOUSE GUESTS?
HOW MANY GUARDS DID THEY HAVE?
WELL SPOTTED.
TYPICALLY TWO, FROM WHAT I HEAR. THE SAME GUARDS WERE ALWAYS POSTED IN THE SAME ROOMS.
HE'S RATHER WELL-INFORMED ABOUT ALL THIS.
HE EVEN DREW OUT A MAP IN ADVANCE AND IS GIVING ME DETAILED ANSWERS TO MY QUES-TIONS.
HMM
MM...
BUT I CAN'T SHAKE THE FEELING THAT HE KNOWS ALMOST TOO MUCH. THERE MUST BE SOMETHING MORE TO IT.
.....
...SHOULD I COME RIGHT OUT WITH IT OR NOT?
HMMM~!
HMMM~!

GASP
MY BEZOAR!
I HAVEN'T GOTTEN IT YET! I FORGOT ALL ABOUT IT!
RUSTLE
I ALSO COME BEARING AN APOLOGY FROM SIR JINSHI. THAT BEZOAR IS GOING TO TAKE LONGER TO PROCURE THAN EXPECTED.
I'VE KEPT MY MOUTH SHUT ABOUT IT IN CASE HE COULDN'T RESIST HEAD-BUTTING ME AGAIN...
...BUT IT IS MIGHTY LATE.
124

...
WHY SO, ALL OF A SUDDEN?
?
...FOR SOME REASON, DEMAND FOR IT HAS SHOT UP SUDDENLY.
I'VE HEARD THAT ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE...
...HAVE BEEN GIFTING SIR JINSHI WITH RARE ELIXIRS AND MIRACLE CURES OF LATE.
IT'S BECAUSE OF THE RUMOR THAT HE'S BEEN ZEALOUSLY SEARCHING FOR A BEZOAR.

DO MAKE HIM STOP STRINGING ALONG OUR MAIDS...
HE SHOULD JUST ACCEPT ONE OF THEIR INVITATIONS TO DINNER AND BE DONE WITH IT, YOU KNOW.

AND I DOUBT ANY ONE OF THOSE WOULD END IN A MEAL.
I'M SURE JINSHI GETS INVITATIONS APLENTY FROM MEN, WOMEN, EVERYONE.

...HE'D LIKE YOU TO HAVE THIS.
RUSTLE
...A-ANYWAY, THAT'S WHY...

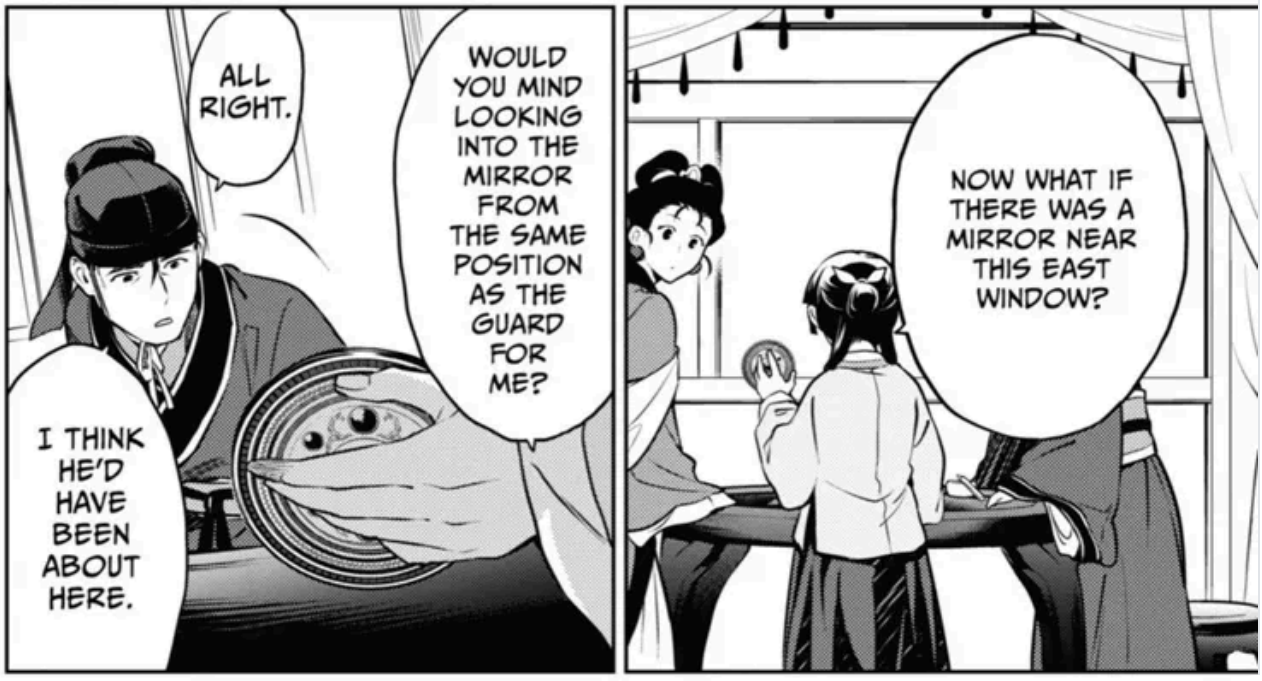
WHOA!

BEAR GALL!
...IT LOOKS LIKE A DRIED PERSIM-MON.
...BUT IT'S A PRECIOUS NATURAL REMEDY THAT'S INCREDIBLY USEFUL IN THE MAKING OF MEDICINES RELATING TO DIGESTION!
IT'S BITTER IN TASTE...
THE DRIED GALL-BLADDER OF A BEAR, TO BE EXACT.

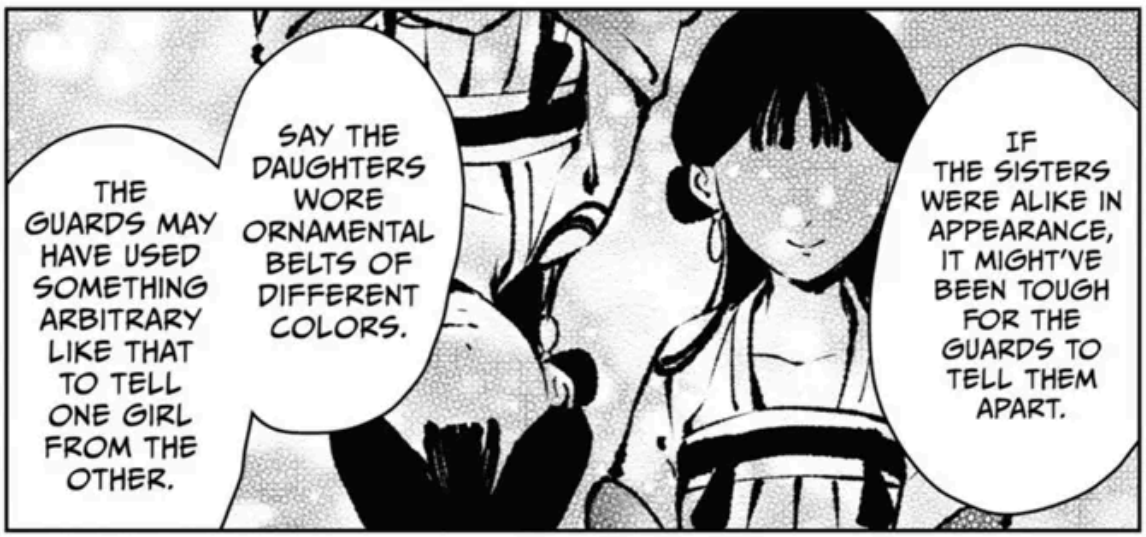
I'M GLAD TO SEE YOU SO PLEASED.
SNORT
ふんす
ふんす
SNORT

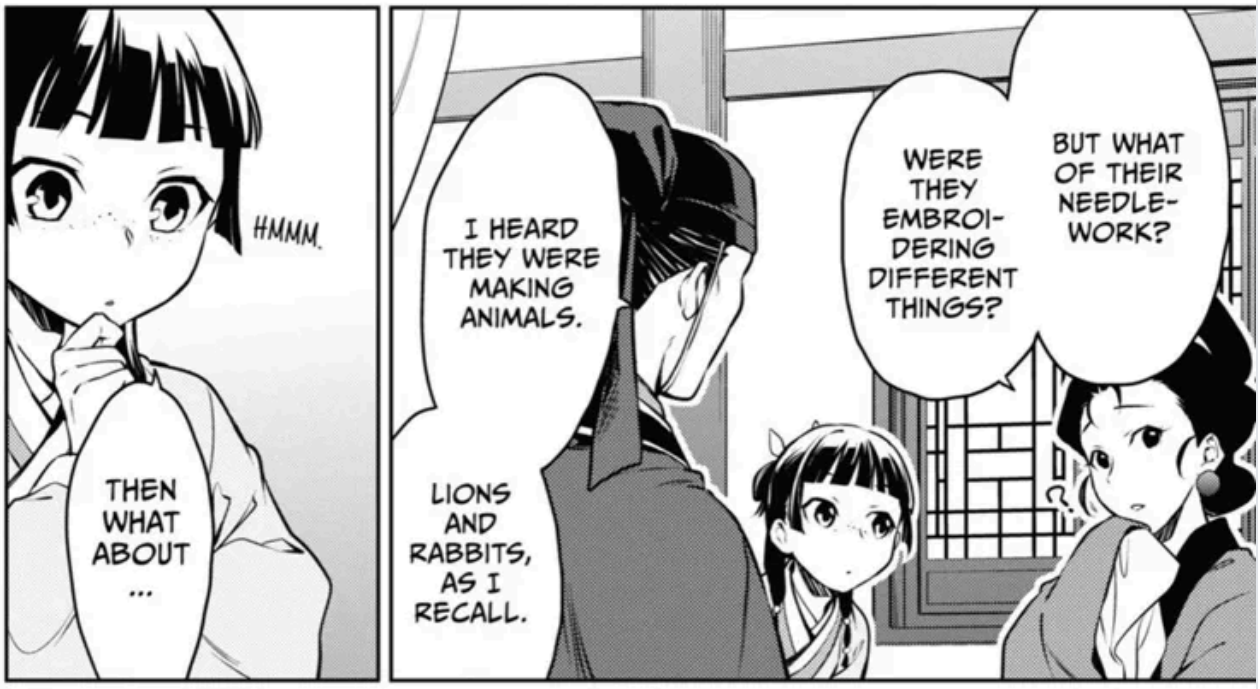
ANYHOW, DOES ANYTHING STRIKE YOU ABOUT THE MATTER AT HAND?
MY PRECIOUS.
MY PRECIOUS.
KUH...
IN TRUTH, SIR JINSHI HAD WANTED TO GIVE IT TO YOU HIMSELF...
PLEASE GIVE ME A LITTLE TIME TO PREPARE.
WELL ...
...I SUPPOSE I CAN'T LEAVE HIM HANGING.

YOU ONLY HAVE THE ONE NUT.
THIS NUT IS A DAUGH-TER.
YES, THAT'S RIGHT.
...LET'S PUT HER HERE.
SINCE SHE SPENDS HER DAYS IN FRONT OF THE WINDOW WITH HER EMBROIDERY ...


ALL RIGHT.
WOULD YOU MIND LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR FROM THE SAME POSITION AS THE GUARD FOR ME?
I THINK HE'D HAVE BEEN ABOUT HERE.
NOW WHAT IF THERE WAS A MIRROR NEAR THIS EAST WINDOW?

IT LOOKS AS IF THERE'S A SECOND NUT!
...OH!
OH MY!
HE'S RIGHT!
...BUT AT A DISTANCE, YOU WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO TELL IF SOMETHING ABOUT IT WAS SLIGHTLY UNNATURAL.
IT MIGHT BE A GIVEAWAY FROM UP CLOSE...
...AND ADJUSTED THEM, SO NOTHING MORE THAN THE GIRL AND THE WALL COULD BE SEEN.
IT'S POSSIBLE THEY USED MULTIPLE MIRRORS...
...SO YOU'RE SAYING ...
...AND THE OTHER GIRL WAS NOTHING MORE THAN THE FIRST GIRL'S REFLECTION IN A MIRROR?
...THAT THERE WAS ONLY ONE GIRL IN THE ROOM...
コク NOD


IF THE SISTERS WERE ALIKE IN APPEARANCE, IT MIGHT'VE BEEN TOUGH FOR THE GUARDS TO TELL THEM APART.
SAY THE DAUGHTERS WORE ORNAMENTAL BELTS OF DIFFERENT COLORS.
THE GUARDS MAY HAVE USED SOMETHING ARBITRARY LIKE THAT TO TELL ONE GIRL FROM THE OTHER.


BUT WHAT OF THEIR NEEDLE-WORK?
WERE THEY EMBROI-DERING DIFFERENT THINGS?
I HEARD THEY WERE MAKING ANIMALS.
LIONS AND RABBITS, AS I RECALL.
HMMM.
THEN WHAT ABOUT ...

...A PICTURE LIKE THIS, FOR EXAMPLE?
SWISH
SWISH

IF YOU TURN THIS PICTURE UPSIDE-DOWN...
...YOU SEE THE SMILING FACE TURN INTO AN ANGRY ONE, DON'T YOU?
!!
AS LONG AS THERE APPEARED TO BE TWO GIRLS IN THE ROOM, THE GUARDS WOULD'VE FOCUSED THEIR ATTENTION THERE.
AND WHILE THE GUARDS WERE LOOKING AWAY, IT MAY BE THAT THE YOUNGER DAUGHTER SLIPPED OUT VIA THE WEST SIDE.
IT WOULD'VE BEEN A MIRROR IMAGE...
...SO THE PATTERN WOULD HAVE APPEARED FLIPPED LIKE THIS.
OF COURSE, THIS THEORY ENTIRELY DEPENDS ON WHETHER OR NOT...
...THE ANNEX HAD A MIRROR BIG ENOUGH FOR THIS PURPOSE, THE FRAME OF WHICH WOULD NOT BE VISIBLE FROM THE WINDOW.
...I SEE.

THE LOOKING GLASS FROM THE FOREIGN ENVOY.
IF THE GIRLS HAD USED A MIRROR WITH SO PERFECT A REFLEC-TION...
...IT WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE THAN ENOUGH TO FOOL A DISTANT ONLOOKER.
AND WHILE IT'S NOT COMMON IN THIS LAND...
...IN THE LANDS OF THE FAR WEST, WHERE PA ONCE STUDIED LONG AGO...
...EMBROI-DERY IS SAID TO BE A FAVORITE PASTIME OF THE DAUGHTERS OF THE UPPER CLASSES.
AND...
...IT JUST SO HAPPENS THAT I BEHELD A REFLECTION THAT WOULD RIVAL THE REAL THING...
...IN ONE SUCH FANCY MIRROR RECENTLY.

...AND FELL PREGNANT.
ACCORDING TO GAO SHUN, THE YOUNGER DAUGHTER OF A WELL-TO-DO FAMILY SNUCK OUT OF HER HOME...
BUT WAS SHE ACTUALLY WITH CHILD...
...OR WAS SHE CARRYING A MUCH DIFFERENT KIND OF SECRET?
...ARE OFTEN TREATED AS HONORED GUESTS.
I SUPPOSE EVEN SUSPECTED SPIES...
BE THAT AS IT MAY...
...I'M NOT SO UNCOUTH AS TO PURSUE THIS TOPIC.

NOW TO MORE IMPOR-TANT MAT-TERS!
SMIRK
WHAT SHALL I MAKE WITH THIS BEAR GALL?!
NUZZLE すり
すり NUZZLE